

Insight and Outlook . . . *By Joseph Kraft*

Cabinet Charade on ABM

A COUPLE OF DAYS ago I described some of the games disarmers had to play in order to get a treaty on non proliferation of nuclear weapons.

An even more complicated charade is being played out to head off the new arms race that might be set in motion if this country moved to deploy an anti-ballistics missile, or ABM system.

The central protagonists in this struggle are not, as commonly supposed, the Soviet Union and the United States. They are the United States Army and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. For nearly a decade the Army has been arguing that the ABM system should be moved from research to deployment as a means of saving American lives in the event of a nuclear attack.

McNamara has argued against deployment on the grounds that defensive missiles were not very effective to begin with; that any technical improvements in the defense could easily be more



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than matched by improvements in the offensive missiles; and that it was exceedingly costly—ranging from about \$5 billion for the "thin" system necessary to block a crude attack to an estimated \$40 billion for a defense against a sophisticated attack.

Events gave the debate a new turn in the fall of last year. In the course of the year the Chinese made progress toward missiles, and the Russians were detected supplementing a fairly crude ABM system set up in Moscow with another, undetermined, kind of system set up to the north of Moscow and called, after a Soviet city, the Tallinn system.

THESE CHANGES, coming against the background of the struggle in Vietnam, brought a unified stand on the part of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for deploying the ABM system. And there were some sympathetic noises from Republican leaders.

At that point the Administration widened the fight to include an international charade. The President, in the State of the Union message, invited the Soviet Union to discuss with this country possibilities for putting a lid on the new ABM developments. With great show, the American Ambassador to Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson, was armed with a letter on the subject to Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin.

The well-publicized approach to the Russians on the ABM has generated all kinds of curious noises from Soviet officials. Kosygin, during his visit to London two weeks ago, underlined the difference between offensive and defensive missiles—an apparent indication the Russians might discuss offensive missiles but not the defensive ABM system. However, Pravda interpreted the Kosygin statement to mean that Moscow was prepared to talk about both offensive and defensive missiles. Then next day the Soviet Foreign Ministry disavowed the Pravda interpretation.

That same day two high-

at least some missiles might get by the Soviet ABM system.

THE MEANING of this disarray is by no means clear. And the ABM proponents are still active in this country. In the past week both the Joint Chiefs and the Republican National Committee have put out statements in effect advocating ABM deployment at an early date.

But the Republican statement, while citing Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, did not cite a single Republican from the congressional leadership. And the statements of the Joint Chiefs harked back to complicated differences within the intelligence community about what the Russians are doing.

My feeling is that the proponents of ABM deployment are now on the defensive. There is obviously something to discuss with the Soviet Union in the missile field. If nothing else, the Administration can always arrange for Cabinet-level talks on the matter. And in the interim it can use the prospect of talks as a barrier against early deployment.

Messy as it may be, in short, the charade seems to be doing the trick. At the very least, ABM deployment seems not for now.

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